

Washington, DC – Seeking to end the persecution of a Bangladeshi journalist, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution today introduced by U.S. Reps. Mark Kirk (R-IL) and Nita Lowey (D-NY) which calls on the Government of Bangladesh to drop sedition charges against Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury. Choudhury faces prosecution for his advocacy for interfaith dialogue between Jews and Muslims, as well as articles he published critical of Islamic extremism. Under Bangladeshi law, sedition is a crime punishable by death.

“The Bangladeshi Government must cease its persecution of Shoaib Choudhury,” said Congressman Kirk. “For his message of moderation and interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Jews, he is facing unjust criminal charges in an effort to silence his ideas. The House of Representatives sent a clear message today – we cannot allow an outspoken advocate for religious freedom to be quelled by intolerance.”

“Mr. Choudhury is an invaluable voice of cooperation and moderation in a world where extremism and prejudice too often dictate the course of events,” said Congresswoman Lowey. “We must do everything we can to ensure that Mr. Choudhury’s voice continues to be heard and that this baseless campaign to punish him is abandoned.”

Choudhury was detained and his passport was seized in November 2003 at Zia International Airport in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on his way to board a flight bound for Tel Aviv, Israel, to participate in the annual Hebrew Writers Conference. On that same day, police raided his home and newspaper, seizing files, and computers.

As Bangladeshi law prohibits travel to Israel, Mr. Choudhury was cited for a minor passport violation. Subsequently, he was charged with sedition, accused of espionage as an Israeli spy and incarcerated for 17 months.

Choudhury's prospects seemed bleak until his friend and Mount Prospect, Ill., native, Dr. Richard Benkin, brought the case to the attention of Congressman Kirk. Upon hearing Choudhury's story, Kirk met with Bangladeshi Ambassador to the United States, Shamsheer Chowdhury, and wrote to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Bangladeshi Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia calling for Choudhury's release. Choudhury was released on bail in April 2005.

Despite pledges from senior Bangladeshi government officials that legal action against Choudhury would be dropped, the government pressed forward with its prosecution of Choudhury for sedition. Choudhury's newspaper offices were bombed by Islamic extremists in July and he was attacked by a mob in his office on October 5. A judge with alleged ties to an Islamic extremist group ruled that Choudhury must stand trial for sedition.

The American Jewish Committee has been working with U.S. Reps. Kirk and Lowey on securing Choudhury's freedom. "The American Jewish Committee commends Representatives Kirk and Lowey for their introduction of a resolution calling upon the Bangladesh Government to close the sedition case against Mr. Choudhury, investigate and hold accountable those who have physically attacked him, and take steps to protect him," said Richard Foltin of the AJC. "In May 2006, AJC presented Mr. Choudhury with its Moral Courage Award recognizing his efforts to promote dialogue between Muslims and Jews and his courage to speak the truth against Islamic extremism. It is a scandal that Mr. Choudhury is being prosecuted for these very efforts to build greater interfaith understanding. We urge the Government of Bangladesh to act quickly in response to this resolution."

A copy of the resolution is attached.

## **RESOLUTION**

Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the Government of Bangladesh should immediately drop all pending charges against Bangladeshi journalist Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury.

Whereas Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury is a Bangladeshi journalist who, because of his beliefs in an interfaith dialogue between Jews and Muslims and criticism of Islamic extremism, is on trial for sedition, an offense punishable by death;

Whereas on November 29, 2003, Mr. Choudhury was arrested at Zia International Airport in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on his way to board a flight bound for Tel Aviv; Mr. Choudhury's passport was seized, along with considerable sums of money and several personal items; on that same day police raided Mr. Choudhury's home and newspaper offices,

seizing files, computers, and other valuables;

Whereas Mr. Choudhury was detained in Dhaka Central Jail for a passport violation, then subsequently charged with sedition; Mr. Choudhury suffered harsh interrogation techniques and received no treatment for a debilitating case of glaucoma; Mr. Choudhury's incarceration lasted 17 months without legal recourse;

Whereas on April 30, 2005, after intervention by the United States Department of State and congressional offices, Mr. Choudhury was released on bail;

Whereas in the subsequent months, senior members of the Bangladeshi Government made continuous public promises that there was no substance to Mr. Choudhury's pending charges and that all charges would be dropped;

Whereas on September 29, 2005, Mr. Choudhury was awarded the "Freedom to Write Award" by PEN USA;

Whereas on May 5, 2006, Mr. Choudhury was awarded the American Jewish Committee's Moral Courage Award in absentia in Washington, D.C.; two days prior to Mr. Choudhury receiving the award, after returning Mr. Choudhury's passport and appearing to allow him to attend, senior Bangladeshi Government officials issued threats to prevent him from leaving the country;

Whereas on September 18, 2006, a judge with alleged ties to an Islamic extremist party ruled that Mr. Choudhury will stand trial for sedition; the judge made this ruling despite the Public Prosecutor's testimony in court days before that the government did not have evidence and would not object to the charges being dropped;

Whereas members of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom visited with Mr. Choudhury on their trip to Bangladesh in February and March 2006;

Whereas on October 6, 2006, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote a letter to U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard A. Boucher calling on the United States Government to strengthen the “voices of moderation” in countries like Bangladesh where the rule of law, democratic institutions, and respect for human rights are under assault by violent extremists; the Commission identified Mr. Choudhury as one of those voices that should not be silenced;

Whereas, according to the Department of State’s 2005 Country Report on Human Rights Practices in Bangladesh, “Attacks on journalists and newspapers, and government efforts to intimidate them, political party activists, and others, occurred frequently.”; and

Whereas moderate voices in the Muslim world must be supported and protected to advance the security of the United States and its allies:

Now, therefore, be it Resolved, That it is the sense of the House of Representatives that—

(1) the Government of Bangladesh should immediately drop all pending charges against Bangladeshi journalist Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury;

(2) the Government of Bangladesh should immediately return all of Mr. Choudhury’s confiscated possessions; and

(3) the Government of Bangladesh should cease harassment and intimidation of Mr. Choudhury and take steps to protect Mr. Choudhury.